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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 PRAGUE 000222

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SUBJECT: CZECHS HOST COUNCIL OF EUROPE CONFERENCE ON BELARUS

REF: A. PRAGUE 0204

[1](#)B. PRAGUE 0068

Classified By: Acting DCM Michael Dodman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary. The Czech MFA hosted a Council of Europe (COE) Conference on Belarus February 22. The Conference was attended by Belarusian democratic opposition members, delegates of numerous CE member states, and NGOs active in Belarus. The COE delegates discussed the value of (1) increasing access to free media in Belarus, (2) facilitating international travel for ordinary Belarusians (but not members of the Lukashenko regime), (3) urging Russia to play a substantive role in ensuring a fair election, and (4) establishing a COE information office in Minsk. Although the Russian COE delegate did not expressly disagree with any of these points, he argued a Lukashenko victory and democracy are not mutually exclusive. (Some COE delegates openly criticized his views.) The Belarusian opposition members were impressively united and spoke with one voice. They described the worsening political repression in Belarus. They requested specific assistance from the international community, including additional funding to print and quickly disseminate opposition campaign materials. They also strongly urged election monitors to stay on after the election to prevent retaliatory violence ordered by the GOB. Following the Conference, COE president Rene Van Der Linden called for an end to isolation for the Belarusian people, and proposed the opening of a COE office in Minsk. Ambassador Cabaniss met privately with opposition members on the margins of the Conference. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (U) Ambassador Cabaniss and Poloff attended the February 22 Conference in Prague. Czech FM Cyril Svoboda and COE President Rene Van Der Linden chaired the event, which was attended by members of Alexander Milinkevich's democratic opposition party, including Vincuk Viachorka (Milinkevich's foreign policy advisor), Jaroslav Romanchuk, Stanislaw Shushkevich, and Sergie Ivanovich Kalyakin (of the democratically minded Belarus Party of Communists). COE participants included the foreign ministers of Slovakia and Hungary, and foreign ministry, parliamentary, and embassy representatives from Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Turkey, Romania, Russia, and others. In addition, several NGOs attended, including Czech NGO People in Need, Polish NGO East European Democratic Center (EEDC), and the German Marshall Fund.

[1](#)3. (U) Conference discussions addressed: (1) worsening conditions in Belarus, (2) CE proposals to assist Belarus, (3) opposition requests for assistance, (4) the importance of

Russian cooperation, and (5) post-election issues.

Conditions in Belarus: Bad and Getting Worse

¶4. (U) According to the spokesmen for the Belarusian opposition members, Vincuk Viachorka and Jaroslav Romanchuk, political repression is increasing. Belarusian voters are regularly prevented from meeting with Milinkevich (e.g., meeting places are closed by the KGB at the last minute, etc.). Those who do meet him face GOB harassment. Political arrests and detentions in Belarus are on the rise. For example, the day before the Conference the Belarusian KGB searched the apartments of 12 opposition supporters and made arrests.

¶5. (SBU) Viachorka said the GOB plans to "isolate" the opposition on election day (March 19), perhaps using "detention, narcotic drugs, or even weapons." (Note: no further information was provided.) He said the recent arrests are merely "training" for the GOB repression planned for the eve of the election.

¶6. (U) Harassment of foreign diplomats who are assisting the opposition, such as Czech Charge d'Affaires Ruml, has also increased (ref A). Opposition members claimed Lukashenko's repressive actions show he fears losing the election.

CE Proposals to Assist Belarus

¶7. (U) During the Conference, COE delegates focused on the

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importance of democracy, fair elections, and bringing Belarus back into the European family. They disagreed on how to achieve these goals. Some delegates supported harsh sanctions if the GOB fails to reform. Others urged constructive engagement on the grounds that the policy of isolation has led nowhere. The Russian COE delegate, Viktor Kolesnikov, a member of the Russian Duma, disagreed that a Lukashenko victory would be presumptively unfair (see section on Russia below).

¶8. (U) In general, the delegates believe the COE should: (1) provide Belarusians greater access to independent media, (2) improve opportunities for international travel and education for ordinary Belarusians, (3) urge Russia to play a substantive role in ensuring a fair election, and (4) establish a COE information office in Minsk.

¶9. (U) Additionally, some delegates had specific proposals:

-- Czech FM Cyril Svoboda repeatedly challenged President Lukashenko to consent to a televised political debate with Milinkevich.

-- COE President Rene Van Der Linden proposed to travel to Belarus to meet with members of the GOB.

-- Slovak FM Eduard Kukan urged continued transatlantic cooperation, and noted NGO cooperation is an important element of foreign policy.

-- Latvian Dep FM Vaira Paegle said Latvia, as Belarus' neighbor, has observed that democracy has entered Belarus by creeping incrementally across the border. She urged the international community to find "new and surprising" ways to foster "creeping democracy."

-- The Estonian delegate urged the international community to: (1) coordinate its efforts, (2) reassess communication programs periodically to confirm they remain effective, (3) ensure Belarusians receive a European standard of education,

and (4) remain flexible when awarding funding to Belarusian NGOs to ensure funds reach NGOs who will support EU values. (Note: the last point was also emphasized by Pawel Kazancki, Chairman of Polish NGO EEDC, in a roundtable discussion with the opposition members on the margins of the Conference. Kazancki explained most Belarusian NGOs have been deregistered by the GOB. He also urged support for Belarusian youth groups, such as Zubr.)

Opposition Requests for Assistance

¶10. (U) The opposition members, through their spokesmen, agreed on the need for free media, election monitoring, international travel opportunities for ordinary Belarusians, and post-election support. They also made specific requests:

-- First, Belarusians need to know about the opposition's pro-democracy platform. The opposition requested funds to print additional campaign flyers and distribute them as quickly as possible. (Note: the opposition said it has about five cents per registered voter to print and distribute campaign materials. They said these funds do not adequately cover the transportation costs of campaign volunteers. Gabriela Dlouha, Director of the Czech MFA's Transition Cooperation Unit (TRANS), previously cited the transportation cost issue as a "gap" in donor funding.) The opposition's campaign wish list also includes funds to purchase advertising on Russian and European television channels that can be viewed in Belarus.

-- Second, as a result of the denial of access to the electronic media and Lukashenko's pre-election repression of the democratic opposition, the opposition members asked the international community not to recognize a Lukashenko victory as valid. With respect to election monitoring, they urged monitors to pay close attention to exit interview results. They strongly urged monitors to stay for a time after the election, in the hope that the presence of hundreds of monitors might deter government-ordered retaliatory violence. (Note: the delegates of Romania, Estonia, Ukraine, and Lithuania all promised to provide monitors.)

-- Third, the opposition members urged the international

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community to facilitate the travel of ordinary Belarusians to other countries so that Belarusians can experience the benefits of living in a free society. On the other hand, the opposition members advocated harsh travel restrictions for the regime's worst offenders (e.g., those responsible for disappearances, or those who have expelled students from universities for their political views, etc.).

-- Finally, the opposition members urged the international community to stay engaged after the election. Their spokesmen suggested ongoing constructive dialogue with Lukashenko, and asked the international community to continue efforts to increase the capacity of civil society (ref B).

¶11. (U) The opposition members expressed gratitude for international support. Of particular note, Romanchuk enthusiastically praised U.S. Ambassador Krol, of Embassy Minsk, whom he called "the right man for the job." Shushkevich also praised the U.S. and German Embassies for helping him obtain the papers needed to travel to Prague to attend the Conference.

Russian Cooperation: Fact of Fiction?

¶12. (U) All of the speakers stressed the importance of cooperation with Russia to ensure a fair election in Belarus. Russian delegate Viktor Kolesnikov, a member of the Russian

Duma, said Russia wants Belarus to become a democratic, stable, and prosperous country with close links to Europe. Yet he disagreed that a Lukashenko victory is inconsistent with these goals. He asserted Lukashenko was democratically elected and Belarusians are still happy with him. Kolesnikov said he has traveled extensively throughout Belarus, and everywhere people have expressed their strong support for Lukashenko. In his view, external support of the opposition party could actually harm Belarus. He urged the West to respect "Slav traditions," which come from "mother's milk." He also prescribed a drawn-out democratic transition: evolution rather than revolution.

¶13. (U) Following these statements, Latvian Dep FM Paegle asked rhetorically whether Russia is part of the problem or the solution. Czech delegate Jazub quipped that due to his popularity, Lukashenko will surely get 103% of the vote.

¶14. (U) Romanchuk said Milinkevich favors a strong strategic relationship with Russia. He said a Milinkevich government would actually be to Russia's advantage because it would permit free trade and provide better protection for Russian investors in Belarus. He pointed out, however, that Russia provides substantial aid to Belarus (roughly 15% of Belarus' GDP). He said this aid gives the appearance of support for the Lukashenko regime.

Post-Election

¶15. (U) The COE delegates did not focus on post-election issues.

¶16. (U) The opposition is convinced Milinkevich could win if the election was fair (but they do not expect it to be). They said the democratic opposition is campaigning fairly and is not trying to fuel a color revolution. The opposition members did not predict defeat outright, but said their goal is to achieve at least 40-45% of the votes. They believe such numbers would demonstrate strong public awareness and support of Milinkevich and democratic values.

¶17. (U) If Lukashenko stays in power, the opposition members said their coalition, which they claim represents 92% of the democratically minded organizations in Belarus, will remain intact. They will continue distributing information.

Ambassador Cabaniss' Meeting

¶18. (SBU) Ambassador Cabaniss met privately with opposition members on the margins of the conference (the meeting was also attended by Marek Toman, of the MFA's Transition Cooperation Unit). The Ambassador expressed USG support for

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the opposition's cause and commended their courage. The opposition members thanked the Ambassador, described the union of the democratic opposition party and its pro-democracy platform, and detailed some of the challenges they face in the run-up to the election.

Upcoming events

¶19. (U) Hungarian FM Somogyi Ferenc announced Hungary has invited Milinkevich to attend the March 9 Visegrad-4 (Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland) foreign ministers meeting in Budapest.

¶20. (U) Slovakian FM Kukan announced a conference in Bratislava April 25-26 to provide an opportunity to evaluate results of the Belarusian election.

Comments

¶21. (C) Comment. This Conference is another example of the GOCR's commitment to promoting democracy in Belarus. FM Svoboda chaired the event, which was organized by Gabriela Dlouha and her TRANS staff, with the assistance of Czech NGO People in Need. The MFA also hosted dinners and NGO roundtables on the margins of the Conference. Following the Conference, Marek Toman, TRANS, confirmed approximately 25 Czechs will serve as OSCE election monitors in Belarus, including himself, Dlouha, and other officials from the MFA and the Czech parliament.

¶22. (C) Comment continued. At the Conference itself, the cohesiveness of the opposition delegation was striking, especially considering the range of ideologies espoused by its individual members (whom belong to political parties on the right, the left, and the democratic Belarusian Party of Communists). It is also worth noting the Russian delegate was alone in his comments supporting Lukashenko, which drew some criticism and even polite derision from other delegates. Yet COE speakers continued to emphasize the importance of Russia's role in ensuring a fair election. In discussions on the sidelines, Conference participants told Poloff Russia appears to be moving away from its previously neutral position on Lukashenko, and now seems to tacitly support him.
CABANISS